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ABSTRACT

The enrollment of Asian and Pacific Islander (API) students is increasing rapidly, so it is important for school personnel and community members to learn to communicate with API families. This guide describes how the backgrounds and cultures of the various API groups affect their attitudes and behavior. The three general ethnicities within the API community are Pacific Islanders, Southeast Asians, and East Asians. It is important not to generalize an understanding of one group to another. In general, however, APIs see teachers as professionals with authority over their children's schooling. They believe that parents should not interfere and may regard teachers who seek parent participation as incompetent. East Asians in particular value formal education and may place high expectations on their children. Language may be a barrier to many API children, and cultures pose many opportunities for misunderstanding. Good communication depends on respect for API cultural beliefs, communication in person rather than in writing, clear communication of such details as meeting times, and maintaining a professional's role. Explaining aspects of American culture, especially that parent participation is a tradition in American schools, can be very helpful. To avoid putting unnecessary pressure on API students, it is important to reject the stereotype that most Asian students are gifted and that APIs are generally docile. School personnel and community leaders should work with local API organizations to enhance communication. (SLD)

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for parents/about parents

A GUIDE TO COMMUNICATING WITH ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

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The enrollment of Asian and Pacific Islander (API) students is increasing drastically, so it is important for school and community people to learn how to communicate with API families. Since APIs communicate very differently from native-born Americans, this guide describes how the backgrounds and cultures of the various API groups affect their attitudes and behavior.

The API Community

There are three general ethnicities within the API community: (1) Pacific Islanders, mostly Hawaiians, Samoans, and Guamanians; (2) Southeast Asians, comprised of Indochinese from Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Burmese and Philippinos; and (3) East Asians, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

Not only do these three large groups differ, but subgroups within each group often also differ, so it is important not to generalize an understanding of one group to another.

Immigrants from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are more likely to have a middle-class background, while Southeast Asian refugees were mostly rural or the urban poor. Middle-class APIs encourage intellect and self-direction, and may have less trouble interacting with teachers. The fatalist beliefs and rigidity in thinking more common among poor APIs can create communication problems with school personnel.

Traumatic experiences in war or refugee camps can hamper APIs' ability to communicate, and can profoundly influence children's reaction to a new environment.

API Cultures and Communication

Culture has both open and hidden dimensions that govern how people communicate.

Open Culture

Open culture refers to the values and norms of family, religion, formal language, social organizations, and customs.

Education. In general, APIs see teachers as professionals with authority over their children's schooling. They believe that parents are not supposed to interfere, and may regard teachers who seek parent involvement as incompetent.

East Asians, particularly Chinese, highly value formal education, and believe that high achievement brings honor to the family, while failure brings shame. The pressure upon children to succeed often leads to intergenerational conflicts, and many API children suffer from test anxiety, social isolation, and low self-esteem because of mediocre school performance.

Asians have difficulty accepting learning disabilities and depression, and believe that psychological distress is an indication of organic disorders and shameful to both the individual and the family.

Language. A barrier to schooling for some rural Southeast Asians is their prior lack of exposure to any writing system. Their language problems may be increased by problems such as learning disabilities and hearing impairment. So it may be difficult to separate language differences (characteristics of learning English as influenced by the native language) from speech disorders (language difficulties resulting from mental or physical disorders).

Hidden Culture

Hidden culture regulates daily life unconsciously. More subtle than open culture, it is reflected in how we talk, walk, make facial expressions, and think and feel.

Time. Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders perceive time as a process that lets different things happen at the same time. Westerners schedule events one at a time. Thus, API parents may come late for an appointment without apologizing, or seem to be inattentive when teachers are speaking. Some APIs, such as the Hmong, believe time itself can solve problems better than humans, and, therefore, don't move quickly to solve problems.

Communication. Communication can be either mainly high- or low-context. High-context communication, favored by Asians, does not require clear, exact verbal expression; it relies on interpretation of shared assumptions, non-verbal signals (like body movement), and the situation. Low-context communication, used by Anglo Americans, involves very elaborate expressions that do not need much situational interpretation.

Like other low-context cultures, APIs, particularly East Asian Americans, behave politely and even submissively. They stay constantly "tuned" to the moods of the people they are talking to, and expect the others to do the same. In conversations, Asians nod their heads a lot, avoid eye contact, and usually don't speak spontaneously or critically. Westerners, who only pay attention to what is said, often ignore nonverbal cues. So, when Americans do not hear Asians disagree, they may move to resolve an issue, only to have the Asian Americans respond angrily because the Americans did not understand their nonverbal messages.

Suggestions for Good Communication

General Communication

- Respect API cultural beliefs.
- Establish the professional's role and assume authority.
- Communicate in person, not in writing.
- Be clear and firm about meeting times.

- Be patient at meetings, and do not interrupt periods of silence.
- Watch for nonverbal cues.
- Understand that some APIs' smiles often express confusion and embarrassment, not pleasure.
- Provide clear and full information, such as what will be provided by, and is expected from, each person in the meeting.
- Be sensitive when asking for information about APIs' children, because many had bad experiences with authoritarian systems, and because they don't like to talk about themselves.
- Deal with immediate needs and give concrete advice.
- Reach agreement by compromising.

Parent Involvement

- Explain that parent involvement is a tradition in American education.
- Encourage involvement without increasing family tension; respect the tradition that the young obey the elderly, even though in daily life English literate teenaged APIs often serve as interpreters and participants in family decision-making.
- Offer a family English literacy project to help parents understand teaching and learning in the U.S., and to bridge the generation gaps within families.
- Make it clear that a child's psychosocial problems are not a source of shame, and that cooperation between the family and the professionals can solve them.

Communication with API Children

- To avoid putting unnecessary pressure on students, reject the stereotype that most East Asian children are gifted, and that APIs generally are docile.
- Distinguish between behavioral or physical disorders and communication difficulties, and overcome communication difficulties to correctly identify behavioral and health problems. Communication problems may be related to language differences and culture.
- Pay particular attention to signs of hearing impairment—a highly prevalent disability among Southeast Asians.
- Help students handle stress and negative feelings resulting from culture conflict.

Finally, since local API ethnic organizations and churches give strong support to families and children, school people and community leaders should ask these organizations to help them meet and talk with Asian families.

This guide, by Wendy Schwartz, is based on **Beyond Culture: Communicating with Asian American Children and Families**, *a digest published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Clearinghouse for a copy of the digest and a list of other publications.*

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Other guides to help parents help their children learn can be found on the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) on the Internet. You can reach the NPIN World Wide Web at http://ericps.ed.uiuc, or the NPIN Gopher at gopher://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu. Ask someone in your local library, your children's school, or your parent center how to find this network.

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